

A collection of Libyan fiction in Banipal 40: Magazine of Modern Arab Literature (2011)

By sheer coincidence, just as the political unrest erupted in Libya in early 2011, a first-ever [collection of Libyan fiction](#) was published by [Banipal](#). The publication is prefaced by a statement supported by more than 400 Arab intellectuals, writers and journalists pertaining to the recent events in Bahrain, Libya and Yemen. Collaboratively, they condemn the corruption in governmental regimes and the kowtowing Arab media, from whom they unanimously disassociate themselves. This publication is both a political manifesto and a sparkling mosaic of literary faces, genres and words from Libya.

Banipal publishers, based in London, publish their literary journal, *Banipal: Magazine of Modern Arab Literature*, three times a year. It serves to showcase contemporary Arab authors in English translation, irrespective of where and in which language they are writing or publishing. The fiction in the collection includes extracts from published and forthcoming works, private collections, poems, short stories and chapters from novels. The non-fiction component includes interviews, author profiles and relevant essays about literature, such as on the Libyan short story and another on the Libyan novel.

The reader is exposed to talent emerging from diverse life paths, from established, highly accomplished writers as well as fresh, emerging ones. Some are exiles in the west, by choice or necessity, others are based in Libya, and yet others live elsewhere the Arab world. While many are ensconced professionally in the arts and culture, others are doctors, lawyers or accountants, in professions that

have little call for daily rumination over a thesaurus. Yet they write. Lyrically.

The threads of connection to other countries are sometimes tenuous, sometimes fierce. 'The First Lesson in Migration', by Razan Naim Moghrabi, tells of a woman curious about the smuggling of people: of Iraqis based in Libya who pay to be smuggled to Italy and of the ruthless individuals who traffic them. The youngest contributor to the collection, 21-year-old Mohammed Mesrati, describes in a chapter from his novel, *Mama Pizza*, the experiences of a young man distributing menus on foot to homes in London. We read a chapter from the debut novel of a daring young writer, Wafa Al-Bueissa, set in Alexandria. For her frank and fearless writing, such as how her young protagonist forges her identity and sexuality by breaking boundaries, the author has been banned in Libya and compelled to seek asylum in the Netherlands.

Ties to the former colonial countries, their languages and cultures linger. In the short story 'Lobsters' by Ahmed Fagih, a philosophy lecturer in Beirut bases himself so slavishly and pedantically on the life and habits of Jean-Paul Sartre, that he plots his own demise to mimic that of his idol. In the short story 'The Bicycle' by Azza Kamil Al-Maghour, a young girl learns to ride a bicycle, venturing into what was formerly a boys-only domain. The story has the gentlest of allusions to Italian architecture, road names and turns of phrase.

Chief protagonists are not only people, but animals: a hoopoe caught in a trap, horses torn between freedom and domestication, a dog named Ramadan, and flocks of migrating birds captured exquisitely by Ibrahim Al-Koni, who despite only learning to read and write Arabic at the age of 12, has become one of Libya's most prolific, respected writers.

The magazine includes blurbs about the shortlisted titles for the International Prize for Arab Fiction, of which three are soon to be published in English. Additionally, Banipal co-funds an annual translation award, [the Saif Ghobash-Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation](#). Fittingly, translators are always named and the quality of translation throughout the publication is superb. Seemingly effortless.

The essay 'Translating Ibrahim al-Koni' by translator Elliot Colla explores the multi-layered art of translation from the translator's perspective. While there are thousands of captivating words, it is the book covers, photos of literary locations and portraits of the various contributors that add a visual component. We get to see the faces of the many collaborators who bring to life works that otherwise might remain inaccessible to those of us who don't read Arabic. We put a face to the name of not only the bank of writers, but of the translators and reviewers, too. This is because *Banipal* strives not only to bring to the English-reading world diverse writing from the Arab pen, but to illuminate the importance and contribution of literary translators.

The next issue, *Banipal 42*, has a special focus on *New Writing from the Emirates*. It showcases works by 27 authors from the United Arab Emirates – and includes background articles on the short story, the development of modern poetry and the novel. [Banipal 42 – New Writing from the Emirates](#) completes the magazine's 14th year of continuous publication, while its new Guest Literature feature from a non-Arab country further promotes intercultural dialogue between cultures through literary translation. To find out about [subscription](#) and receiving a complimentary back copy, you can visit the website and take a wander through the immense and stimulating world of Arab literature.

For those of us engaged in the field of comparative literature, *Banipal* shines unveils those regions and voices which we would otherwise not be able to enjoy, experience and compare. Through their theme-based collections, we are free to study the ways in which symbols travel across borders and through pens into different languages and cultures: through captivating tales written by fine wordsmiths.

The author

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The review

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